

## Message Text

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ACTION EA-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10

L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06

TRSE-00 AID-05 HA-05 /071 W

-----006359 161305Z /14

R 160946Z MAR 78

FM AMEMBASSY MANILA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3040

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 MANILA 4260

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, SHUM, RP

SUBJECT: LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS: CAMPAIGN AT MIDPOINT

1. SUMMARY: AT THE HALFWAY MARK, THE CANDIDACY OF DETAINED EX-SENATOR AQUINO HAS BECOME VIRTUALLY THE ONLY ISSUE IN THE CAMPAIGN FOR THE INTERIM LEGISLATURE. WHETHER HE SHOULD BE RELEASED TO CAMPAIGN OR TO SIT IN THE IBP, AND WHETHER THE CHARGES AND THE DEATH SENTENCE AGAINST HIM ARE JUSTIFIED, SEEM TO BE SERVING AS SHORTHAND SYMBOLS FOR ALL THE UNDERLYING ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST PRESIDENT MARCOS AND MARTIAL LAW. AQUINO'S MARCH 10 TV INTERVIEW HAS GIVEN A MAJOR BOOST TO THE OPPOSITION LABAN GROUP, ALTHOUGH THE GUIDED MEDIA CONTINUES TO TILT ITS COVERAGE STRONGLY IN FAVOR OF THE GOP'S KBL GROUP. WE EXPECT THE GOP TO INCREASE ITS EFFORTS TO DISCREDIT AQUINO AND THE LABAN IN THE REMAINING WEEKS OF THE CAMPAIGN. THE GENERAL FEELING AT THIS POINT, NEVERTHELESS, IS THAT AQUINO IS AMONG THE FRONT-RUNNERS IN MANILA AND THAT MARCOS FOR THE SAKE OF CREDIBILITY, MIGHT PERMIT HIM TO WIN. END SUMMARY.

2. ISSUES: AS THE 45-DAY CAMPAIGN PERIOD FOR THE APRIL 7 INTERIM BATASANG PAMBANSA (IBP) ELECTIONS REACHES ITS MIDPOINT, DETAINED OPPOSITION LEADER BEIGNO AQUINO, IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, APPEARS TO BE THE ONLY REAL ISSUE.

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PRESIDENT MARCOS, WHO TOOK OVER PERSONAL DIRECTION OF THE GOVERNMENT'S KBL PARTY CAMPAIGN IN METRO-MANILA, HAS TRIED TO REMAIN ALOOF FROM THE VARIOUS AQUINO CONTROVERSIES. DEFENSE SECRETARY ENRILE, AS CHAIRMAN OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE, HAS BEEN CAST AS THE PRINCIPAL GOP PROTAGONIST AGAINST AQUINO.

3. AQUINO, CAMPAIGNING FROM DETENTION AT FORT BONIFACIO, HAS BEEN GIVEN CONSIDERABLE MEDIA EXPOSURE. ALL OF HIS RECENT LETTERS TO PRESIDENT MARCOS HAVE BEEN SUMMARIZED RELATIVELY ACCURATELY IN THE PRESS; HE APPEARED FOR 90 MINUTES ON A TELEVISION INTERVIEW SHOW ON MARCH 10, AND HE WAS PERMITTED TO HOLD A PRESS CONFERENCE THE FOLLOWING DAY. THROUGHOUT, AQUINO HAS BEEN REMARKABLY RESPECTFUL TOWARDS MARCOS AND MODERATE IN HIS CRITICISMS, PROBABLY TO ENSURE CONTINUED MEDIA ACCESS BUT ALSO LEADING TO RUMORS AND SPECULATION ABOUT POSSIBLE DEALS WITH THE GOVERNMENT. A FACE-TO-FACE TELEVISED DEBATE BETWEEN ENRILE AND AQUINO IS EXPECTED WITHIN THE NEXT FEW DAYS.

4. AQUINO'S INCREASED PUBLIC EXPOSURE HAS DRAMATICALLY RAISED THE LEVEL OF INTEREST IN ELECTIONS IN MANILA. SEVERAL SOURCES HAVE TOLD US THAT PRIVATE POPULARITY POLLS HAVE AQUINO CONSISTENTLY AMONG THE TOP TWO OR THREE VOTE-GETTERS IN MANILA. ONLY MRS. MARCOS APPEARS TO BE AHEAD OF HIM. THE GENERAL FEELING AT THIS POINT IS THAT THE GOP, FOR CREDIBILITY'S SAKE, MAY HAVE TO ALLOW AQUINO TO WIN, HOWEVER MUCH IT WOULD LIKE TO SEE HIM DECISIVELY DEFEATED.

5. OTHER ISSUES APPEAR TO HAVE LOST THEIR STEAM. THE "FOREIGN MEDDLING" THEME HAS NOT BEEN MENTIONED IN RECENT DAYS, BUT PREVIOUS ALLEGATIONS CONTINUE TO REVERBERATE.  
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6. EACH SIDE HAS COMPLAINED ABOUT UNFAIR TACTICS BY THE OTHER. THE KBL HAS DENOUNCED "BLACK PROPAGANDA" AND "FILTHY LANGUAGE" AT THE LABAN RALLIES. MARCOS AND OTHERS CHIDE THE LABAN FOR HAVING NO POSITIVE PROGRAM AND ARGUE THAT THE KBL IS A BIG ENOUGH UMBRELLA TO PERMIT ANY NECESSARY CRITICISM OF GOP POLICIES. THE LABAN, ON THE OTHER HAND, HAS COMPLAINED ABOUT SELECTIVE ELECTRICAL FAILURES DURING RALLIES AND DENIALS OF RALLY PERMITS AT THE LAST MINUTE; RECENTLY IT HAS PUBLICLY SUSPECTED THE GOVERNMENT OF ORGANIZING "FLYING VOTER AQUADS" FROM THE PROVINCES TO RAISE THE KBL TURNOUT IN MANILA.

7. BOTH GROUPS HAVE BEEN HOLDING SEVERAL RALLIES EVERY NIGHT ACROSS THE METROPOLITAN AREA. THE LABAN IN PARTICULAR HAS RECENTLY SHIFTED FROM COLLEGE CAMPUSES TO WORKING-

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 MANILA 4260

CLASS NEIGHBORHOODS AND HAS ATTRACTED INCREASINGLY LARGE CROWDS. IN THE TWO-SIDED DEBATE BETWEEN THE KBL AND LABAN, THE MANY OTHER PARTIES AND INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES HAVE BEEN ALMOST TOTALLY IGNORED.

8. ELSEWHERE IN THE COUNTRY THERE APPEAR TO BE NO PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES AT STAKE. IN SOME REGIONS THE KBL MAY LOSE A FEW SEATS TO ITS OPPONENTS, BUT THIS IS ALMOST ENTIRELY DUE TO PERSONAL RIVALRIES WITHIN THOSE REGIONS.

9. MEDIA CAMPAIGN: ALL MASS MEDIA ARE PREDICTABLY STRONGLY PRO-GOVERNMENT AND PRO-KBL. FOR EVERY COLUMN INCH OR MINUTE OF AIR TIME DEVOTED TO THE LABAN, THE KBL GETS THREE OR FOUR. THE LABAN HAS RECEIVED GENERALLY FAIR TREATMENT IN STRAIGHT NEWS REPORTS, BUT COMMENTATORS ARE ALL PRO-KBL TO ONE DEGREE OR ANOTHER.

10. THE MAJOR MEDIA EVENTS OF THE CAMPAIGN THUS FAR HAVE BEEN THE TELEVISED ENRILE AND AQUINO INTERVIEW SHOWS. TWO RATHER WOODEN TELEVISION DEBATES BETWEEN LABAN AND KBL CANDIDATES HAVE BEEN BROADCAST THIS WEEK, BUT NEITHER GENERATED MUCH LIGHT. A MUCH PUBLICIZED "PRINT DEBATE" ON AGREED ISSUES BETWEEN THE KBL AND LABAN, WHICH WAS TO HAVE STARTED MARCH 3 IN ALL MANILA NEWSPAPERS, HAS BOGGED DOWN IN A DISPUTE OVER NAMING A NEUTRAL ARBITER. THE KBL  
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HAS PROPOSED THE COMELEC, WHICH LABAN POINTS OUT IS STAFFED WITH MARCOS APPOINTEES. LABAN HAS PROPOSED THREE RETIRED SUPREME COURT JUSTICES, WHO THE KBL ASSERTS ARE PERSONAL FRIENDS OF LABAN CAMPAIGN MANAGER TANADA. THE "PRINT DEBATE" MAY YET GET UNDERWAY, BUT ITS CONCENTRATION ON

ESOTERIC ISSUES WILL PROBABLY GIVE IT MORE APPEAL TO  
INTELLECTUAL (AND FOREIGN) OBSERVERS THEN TO THE MASSES.

11. COMELEC AND COURT RULINGS: TWO MAJOR DISPUTES HAVE BEEN  
APPEALED TO COMELEC AND THE SUPREME COURT FOR ADJUDICATION.  
ON THE CONTENTIONS "BLOC VOTING" ISSUE, THE SUPREME COURT  
DECIDED EARLY THIS WEEK TO PERMIT IT BY A VOTE OF TEN  
TO TWO, WITH ONLY JUSTICES TEEHANKEE AND MUNOZ-PALMA FAVORING  
LABAN'S OBJECTIONS. ON THE NATIONALIST PARTY FILING FOR THE  
SAME CANDIDATES AS THE KBL COUNTRYWISE, COMELEC RULED THAT,  
WHILE IT MIGHT BE UNFAIR, IT WAS NEITHER ILLEGAL OR  
UNCONSTITUTIONAL. COMELEC DID, HOWEVER, LIMIT TOTAL KBL  
AND NP SPENDING FOR THEIR IDENTICAL CANDIDATES TO THAT  
ALLOWED FOR A SINGLE PARTY. THE LABAN HAS APPEALED THE  
DOUBLE LISTING OF KBL-NP CANDIDATES ON THE BALLOTS; THE  
SUPREME COURT IS STILL DELIBERATING THIS QUESTION.

12. PROGNOSIS: WITH AQUINO'S ACTIVE ENTRY INTO THE  
CAMPAIGNING, THE OPPOSITION IN METRO-MANILA SEEMS TO BE  
WINNING INCREASING POPULAR SUPPORT AND NOW APPEARS TO HAVE  
A STRONG CHANCE OF GETTING A NUMBER OF SEATS IN THE IBP.  
ANY EFFORT BY THE GOP TO SILENCE AQUINO AT THIS POINT WOULD  
PROBABLY GENERATE EVEN MORE SYMPATHY FOR THE OPPOSITION.  
NEVERTHELESS, MARCOS AND THE KBL CAN BE EXPECTED TO  
CONTINUE TO DO EVERYTHING POSSIBLE TO DISCREDIT AQUINO  
AND LIMIT THEIR LOSSES TO THE LABAN. THUS, WE WOULD  
EXPECT THE CAMPAIGN TO BECOME MORE INTENSE AND MORE ACRIMONIOUS  
IN ITS FINAL STAGES.

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## Message Attributes

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